

The Ballarat Naturalist

September 2019



Northern Plains Grasslands

Grasslands are special places and while they may look like just a sea of dried grass to most people, they are home to many different plants and animals some of which are found in no other ecosystems. You have to walk out into a grassland and look down to see the beauty in detail.

We also have to remember to look up occasionally to enjoy the birds of prey and the wide expanse of sky and distant horizon and listen to pipits, song larks and skylarks. Temperate grasslands are among the most threatened and poorly-reserved ecosystems in the world and grasslands of the northern plains of Victoria have long been recognised to be among the most threatened and poorly-reserved ecosystems in Victoria and Australia.



Showy Foxtails *Ptilotus nobilis* subsp. *nobilis*

Northern Plains Grasslands are distinct from the Volcanic Plains due to the presence of saltbush (*Chenopod*) species, including members of the *Maireana* and *Einadia* genera, and the high diversity of annual wildflowers that link to the semi-arid areas. It is a unique and unusual landscape with a mosaic of Black Box, Buloke and Red Gum woodlands interspersed with grasslands and ephemeral wetlands.



Aboriginal Scar tree

The reasons there are only remnants left are similar across all grasslands and include cultivation, change to farming practices and machinery, habitat fragmentation, illegal ploughing of fire breaks, inappropriate tree planting chemical and fertiliser application. When soil is disturbed and native vegetation is removed, the weeds move in.

In 2012 the northern grasslands were listed as critically endangered under the Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act). They are now referred to as the Natural Grasslands of Murray Valley Plains. This gives the ecosystem an added layer of protection. Existing farming practices may continue but if native grassland is to be removed then there is a process to go through to see if the action is permitted. The EPBC Act is much stronger than existing Victorian legislation.

The grasslands have perennial tussock dominated by one or more such as *Rytidosperma* spp. (Wallaby Grasses), *Austrostipa* spp. (Spear grasses) and *Enteropogon ramosus* (Curly Windmill-grass). Unlike most other native grasslands in south-eastern Australia, *Themeda triandra* (Kangaroo grass) is uncommon or absent.



Broughton pea *Swainsona procumbens*

An unusual insect is the Grassland Froghopper *Perelytrana rara*. It is not listed as threatened but there have only been a few records listed in Victoria. The biggest issue for insects in grassland is when locusts are a problem in cropping areas and aerial spraying is used for control. They are flightless and co-exist with native grasshoppers such as the Australian Plague Locust. Fortunately protected grasslands are usually excluded from the spray program.

An unusual bird is the Plains-wanderer (*Pedionomus torquatus*). It is a small, rarely seen, nocturnal ground-dwelling bird about 15cm tall when on tip-toes and are grassland specialists whose closest relatives are shorebirds or waders. It eats both seeds and insects. Plains-wanderer superficially resembles button quail (*Turnix* spp.), and is often shot by mistake by ‘quail shooters’ when first flushed out of grass.

Zoos Victoria and Taronga Zoo have a project where they are working to breed these birds in captivity and reintroduce them into the grasslands. Plains-wanderer numbers have declined significantly across their range, and they are now listed as critically endangered. Researchers are using special recording devices that plays the calls of the bird which is proving a more reliable way of finding them.

Education must be ongoing to inform and educate the community on the wonders of native grasslands and the important role they play for a range of threatened species.

Elsbeth Swan

Scandinavian reflections

Peter and I spent three weeks recently travelling through Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland. Of course I will not attempt to describe all that but thought a few natural history observations may interest people.

The first time (of about six) we had to slow or halt the bus to avoid reindeer collision was exciting. We all tried to take photos but mine are pretty poor. Herds of up to about forty make driving challenging because it would be possible to run into several at once but they were good to see. After a while we became blasé and just commented and noted them. We saw more reindeer than sheep or even maybe cattle because livestock are kept in barns in winter and even though this was mid summer, clearly many were still in barns.



A boat trip way up north to the Gjesværstappan

Nature Reserve out of Nordkapp was excellent. It was a bird trip. We were issued with padded survival suits so we could stay on deck. I have been wanting to see puffins (other than in the bird park in Singapore) but have had no success until this day when there were thousands. Also seen were a pair of white tailed sea eagles (largest eagle), numerous kittiwakes, guillemots, razor bills, gannets and cormorants. We went very close to a gannet colony and also to one of mixed gannets and cormorants which we found unusual. I would still like to see puffins up close on the ground, because they flew (truly in huge groups) as the boat approached, but binoculars trained on one bird at a time gave good views.

A visit to a husky farm was of interest. They were very friendly, thoroughly enjoying being vigorously patted, dislodging handfuls of hair, as they were moulting. They ate each others balls of fur. They love to run and when a handler harnessed one for our benefit, the almost one hundred went wild with jealous excitement. The handler fitted a small, bright pink shoe. These protect against ice crystals between toes causing damage. They were finding the day hot at 15 degrees Celsius and seeking shade. Most don't run well until minus 20 to 25 degrees.

Crossing the Arctic Circle (66.56 degrees north) was fun, but we continued to the North Cape (a touch over 71 degrees north) and the most northerly point in Europe. The light all night was a novelty to our group and did cause restless nights.

Winter dark must be miserable. The actual night we visited the top was smothered in dense fog and bitterly cold so we gathered at the globe sculpture for a group photo and a shot of fiery drink at midnight before scurrying back into the tourist centre.

The previous night was brilliant sunshine all night so a group of us gathered (in night attire) at the end of our sixth floor corridor to celebrate the mid-night sun.

The Northern Lights Cathedral

at Alta (pictured) is plated with titanium and the sun reflects clearly from this, so as the night progressed photos revealed new angles. Sleep was not a priority.



We went to a zoo so did see bears, a polar bear, wolverines, wolves, lynx, several deer species, moose and smaller animals such as mink, but as they are in quite large enclosures, some were difficult to see, but Arctic fox and Snowy owls were really good to see.



Some of our planned trips were cancelled due to snow heavy enough to call out the snow plough. Closed roads in mid-summer due to snow?



However, many miles of snowy mountain backdrops to fjords bathed in bright sunshine made for lovely vistas and waterfalls were vigorous and frequent.

A good trip, with a variety of scenery and experiences from Viking and Polar ships, bustling cities, beautiful fjords with snowy mountains, different foods including reindeer sausage, trying cloudberries which are wild gathered and considered a seasonal special treat (better with sugar), strange drinks such as pine flavoured liqueur, fish in a huge variety of ways, Trolls, language challenges, beautiful, colourful architecture, numerous boat trips including over-night from Copenhagen to Oslo, river trips, fjord crossings and a few encounters with the indigenous Sami people learning a little about their culture, clothes, customs, music and lives. We had little time to search for wildflowers and some we saw were possibly weeds but I can see why people love their flower pots for a burst of colour.

Claire Dalman

Excerpts from Club Meeting Minutes August 2, 2019

Opening and Apologies

Attendance: President John Gregurke welcomed 31 members and six visitors, noting that Fiona McPhie joined at the last meeting.

Apologies: John Petheram, Ken Hammond, Tim Fletcher, Marie Keatley, John Morrish and Les Hanrahan.

Motion: that the Apologies be accepted.

Moved: P. Norquay **Seconded:** D. Thurgood **Carried.**

Minutes of Club Meeting- July 5, 2019

Motion: that they be accepted as a true & accurate record.

Moved: A. Arnold **Seconded:** C. Hall **Carried.**

Business Arising from Previous Club Meeting on July 5, 2019

Club Membership application for the Entomological Society of Victoria to be arranged.

Business Arising from Correspondence:

Lismore Land Protection Group: call for volunteers to undertake flora/ fauna surveys in high conservation value areas on LLPG member properties in Pura Pura, Banongil East and Mt Elephant this spring. They have some funds to cover fuel costs.

Letters of support for VEAC's final report.

Letters of concern from FNCB re Creswick Trails Project sent to representatives/ staff at Regional Development Victoria, Parks Victoria, Hepburn Shire, DELWP and Dja Dja Wurrung as well as all councillors at Hepburn Shire. Members suggested that other groups to contact could be the Creswick Historical Society and Creswick Museum.

Grant opportunity to fund the digitisation of Club records:

Committee will look at this opportunity in more detail at the next committee meeting.

New member application: John Muchan.

Motion: that John's application be accepted.

Moved: E. Noble **Seconded:** D. Thurgood **Carried.**

If you have an idea for a week of fulfilling work experience for member Indra Bone in November, please contact Emily.

Offer of donation of the late Jack Netherway's FNCB News Sheets from 1978-86 + natural history books: dropped off by Jack's son Peter Netherway at the beginning of the evening.

Janet Dale's lovely thank you card following her induction into Honorary Life Membership of the FNCB was read to members.

Reports:

Treasurer's Report:

Opening bal:	\$8,808.46
Income	\$ 166.00
Expenses	\$ 63.00
Closing bal:	\$8,911.46

Motion: that the Treasurer's Report be accepted and outstanding invoices as tabled be approved for payment.

Moved: K. Elder **Seconded:** A. Arnold

Carried.

Andy provided a follow-up report to the feedback stage/ interactive mapping component of the Barwon River MAC, recommending that members who are interested in learning more & keeping track of project developments visit the "Protecting Rivers: Barwon" section on the Engage Victoria website.

Show & Tell/ Field Reports

Margaret T wondered why Sulphur-crested Cockatoos would eat (or nip off) the blossoms on an almond tree in a backyard in Halls Gap? Vireya added that they vigorously nip off every red flower they find in her garden, whereas the pink flowers seem to be ignored.

Denis reported a wild black rabbit in his Beaufort garden.

Wayne saw an Eastern Spinebill and a Grey Butcherbird in a garden at the corner of Grant St and Albert St, Ballarat.

Graeme noted that he saw a dead wombat by the side of the Midland Hwy north of Meredith, the first time he had seen a wombat in that area.

Joan spotted a Black Kite flying around groups of hikers for about 15 minutes near the tower on top of Flinders Peak in the You Yangs.

John G reported very low numbers of birds at Lake Burrumbeet, with no cormorants, just a few common ducks and a few pelicans, but at Lake Learmonth, he and Roger estimated 5000 Grey Teal, plus Chestnut Teal and Shovelers.

Claire added Shelduck to the birds recorded at Lake Learmonth in the last month.

Excursion To Clarkesdale Bird Sanctuary

The August FNCB excursion was held on Sunday 4th at Clarkesdale Bird Sanctuary (located in Happy Valley near Linton) and was well supported by nineteen club members in generally fine weather. We gathered at the Clare Miller Environment Centre from where we started our exploration during the mid-morning after a brief introduction to the Sanctuary by Emily Noble who is now the Coordinator of the Bird Sanctuary for BirdLife Australia.

Clarkesdale Bird Sanctuary is set in amongst Messmate Stringybark and Peppermint woodland. The Sanctuary and its adjoining reserves total around 535 hectares, with ownership being split between the Trust for Nature, Birdlife Australia and Parks Victoria with private land titles covered by conservation covenants.

The Sanctuary has five recognised Ecological Vegetation Classes: Heathy Dry Forest; Grassy Dry Forest (Depleted); Valley Grassy Forest (Vulnerable); Plains Grassy Woodland (Endangered) and Creek-line Herb-rich Woodland

(Vulnerable). The remnant native forest in the area has been subject to selective logging, gold-mining and other forms of disturbance for many years but is still rich in diversity and supports a vast array of woodland birds.

The dominant trees include Messmate, Candlebark, Red Stringybark, Narrow-leaved and Broad-leaved Peppermints, Scentbark, Yellow Box and Swamp Gum and some planted Ironbark (right) forming an open overstorey about 20m high.



The understorey is a low and sparse shrub layer containing such species as Myrtle Wattle, Black Wattle, Golden Bush-pea, Drooping Cassinia, Heath Tea-tree, Common Heath, Small Grass-tree, Austral Bracken and Grey Tussock-grass. Three years ago, 54ha of pine plantation was harvested, providing a wonderful opportunity to promote natural regeneration of the Heathy Dry Forest and restore high quality habitat. Adjoining the Sanctuary, there are natural areas including Linton Flora and Fauna Reserve (Parks Victoria) and the Happy Valley Water Reserve (Golden Plains Shire), the latter containing some Basalt Plains Grassland.

The Scarsdale District Geological map shows the predominant surface geology as being Ordovician slate, shale, siltstone, sandstone and phyllite overlain in places with Quaternary alluvium, colluvium and soil cover. The Springdallah Lead runs broadly NW – SE through the Sanctuary and was the target for gold mining on the properties from a series of shafts excavated along the Lead. We visited the site of a quartz reef mine evidenced by very noticeable mullock heaps (below) behind the old Ranger's House. The map describes this as having been operated by the 'G. Spence Syndicate'.



Gordon John Clarke OAM purchased the first part of what became Clarksdale Bird Sanctuary, the 31-hectare 'Bird Paddock' in 1957. Gordon was a local landholder, sheep farmer, birdwatcher and conservationist who started keeping records of his bird observations in the 1920s when he was a boy. Gordon was concerned about the decline in woodland birds which he had noticed happening since the 1950s. No doubt he recognised that the decline in bird habitat resulted from bush clearance in the district for farming and its history of widespread mining. His intention was to replant and revegetate the land he purchased and permanently protect the bush remnants by removing the woody weeds such as Gorse that had invaded the bush and threatened the indigenous plants. Gordon donated the Bird Paddock and an adjoining property he called 'Grantiella' (named after the Painted Honeyeater *Grantiella picta*, an occasional visitor to this block) to the then Bird Observers' Club of Australia (now incorporated into Bird-Life Australia) over forty years ago.

Gordon's aim in creating the Sanctuary was to optimise, manage and create habitat to increase the diversity and populations of native birds in perpetuity. The use of the term "Sanctuary" to describe Clarkesdale seems very appropriate in this context. Many of his early plantings were not indigenous to Clarkesdale and surrounding bush but were instead designed to "compensate" for the declining habitat in the area, featuring profuse nectar-producing or seed-rich shrubs and trees, especially from other regions such as Western Australia. As a result, some areas of the Sanctuary provide habitat that tends to favour such species as New Holland Honeyeaters and Red Wattlebirds. The indigenous native forest remnants of Peppermints, Messmate and Scentbark harbour treecreepers and other birds less reliant on nectar-bearing flowers.

The Sanctuary has a facility named the Clare Miller Environment Centre that opened in December 2011. (Clare was a dedicated, long-term volunteer at the Sanctuary as a trustee, member of the management committee & the advisory committee. She is still one of the Friends of Clarkesdale group, devoting many years to planting and revegetation activities). The Centre, funded largely by donations, serves as an education facility. Schools, universities and Landcare Groups use the Environment Centre and its facilities to complement their field work activities. Some local schools visit Clarkesdale every year to develop their observational and practical conservation skills such as identifying birds and survey techniques, and practical work such as invasive weed control, giving them the opportunity to see woodland birds in their natural environment and enjoy other natural history experiences.

We commenced our tour from the Environment Centre under the knowledgeable guidance of Emily Noble and Roger Thomas (who was the first Warden at the Sanctuary early in its history). The 'Cottage Dam' and its surrounds was our first location, named after an early cottage which succumbed to the ravages of termites and weather. Scented Sundew flowers were appearing after the depths of winter and some club members delighted in photographing fungi growing near the damp surrounds to the dam. This year, excess water from the Cottage Dam is being pumped up to the higher and much larger capacity Lake Argyle. From here the water can be redirected to several waterbodies including Gordons Lagoon (near the Ballarat – Skipton Rail Trail) which this season holds the largest amount of water for quite a few years.

Walking towards the Springdallah Lead, Peter Muller spotted an ant's nest that he supposed may be made by the Funnel Ant,

Aphaenogaster longiceps (top right). The excavated ant mound was distinctly funnel shaped and highly visible with a distinct funnel shaped entrance and clearly showing signs of great activity very recently. This species tends to be a nocturnal forager so without Peter being able to see the occupants the species could not definitely be confirmed. He also drew our attention to the nest mound of a Sugar Ant *Camponotus* sp (right). This mound is marked with a blue plastic tag and is one of Peter's study nests.



We later saw a nest of Jumping-jack Ants *Myrmecia pilosula* which Peter declared appeared to be "closed" for the winter much to our relief.

Walking up through an area of Ironbarks that Roger told us he had planted back in the 1980s, Emily spotted a tiny weed new to many of us, Parsley Piert *Aphanes arvensis*. She also showed us rosettes of



Smooth Solenogyne, *Solenogyne dominii* (left) and *Lagenophora stipitata*, the Blue Bottle daisy. This short rhizomatous herb with hairy leaves arranged in a basal rosette may have easily been passed off as 'just another flat weed' so it is important to look at all such plants very carefully. The name comes from the Greek "lagenos"

meaning a flagon and refers to its bottle shaped achenes.

Running through this area was a recently constructed pipeline which had been rehabilitated only about 2 months ago and had practically disappeared in that time since – a very good effort in assisting recovery. This brought us to a small dam called “Potter’s Dam” as it had resulted from an excavation to make mud bricks decades ago. Nearby we saw some Earth Stars (*Geastrum* sp.) (right) and later in the day some Puff Balls (*Lycoperdon* sp.) (below).



Following morning tea back at the Centre, we took a short drive up to the old Ranger’s House above Omega Dam (below) with its islands now ‘lost’ amid the thick vegetation. This had originally been the site of an orchard on the property.

A short walk brought us to

some heathy understorey with peach and cranberry heath and a large Yellow Box with numerous mistletoes, perfect for Painted Honeyeaters and Mistletoe-birds. Walking back to the cars we followed the direction of the Springdallah Lead and saw the spoil heaps from what was probably the ‘G. Spence Syndicate’ quartz mine.



Our afternoon excursion was another car trip up to the former pine plantation and from there we walked to view Lake Argyle (below). The lake still had plenty of capacity to fill but has currently been used to divert water to Gordon’s Lagoon which is probably the most important wetland for birds in the Sanctuary and facilitates visitors’ bird watching observations from two hides located there.



From Lake Argyle we went straight to Gordon’s Lagoon for our own bird-watching experience and to walk around the environs of the Springdallah Creek. This

is a delightful walk through the Candlebarks beside the creek which brought us to Gordon’s Rock with a simple plaque: “Gordon John Clarke OAM 1906–1996”. From here we walked to the bird hide just below the Ballarat-Skipton Rail Trail. In the shrubs beside the track we saw an incredibly neatly constructed Grey Fantail nest (top right), a mossy Yellow Robin’s nest (below) and a Brown Thornbill’s nest with its small, well-concealed opening (bottom right).



Perhaps the biggest surprise and excitement of the day was stumbling upon a 'crop' of what appeared to be numerous Dark Vegetable Caterpillars bursting from the ground under some of the planted Acacias. The photographers really got busy then and no doubt there will be many good images to choose from (see below).

Emily (pers com) has since further pursued this discovery. *"..... I tried to dig up one of the black, finger-like fungi this week to see if it was emanating from a grub and thus perhaps confirm that it was a Cordyceps. I levered out as much as I could using my weeding knife and found the head of a large orange grub at the base. It was about 8cm deep! I hope that if I can post the photo on i-Naturalist, we'll be able to find out what species it is. From the reading I've done so far, it looks like Cordyceps gunnii is most likely, being associated with wattles and parasitising Oxycanus moth larvae (Ghost Moths).*

This seems like a good place to finish this account of a very pleasant day of discovery at Clarkesdale.

Andy Arnold

Bird List for Clarkesdale (compiled by John Gregurke)

Australian Shelduck
Australian Wood Duck
Australasian Grebe
Black Kite
Crimson Rosella
Laughing Kookaburra
White-throated Treecreeper
Superb Fairy-wren
White-browed Scrubwren
Brown Thornbill
White-eared Honeyeater
Red Wattlebird
New Holland honeyeater
White-naped Honeyeater
Golden Whistler
Grey Shrike-thrush
Grey Fantail
Grey Currawong
Eastern Yellow Robin
Red-browed finch



CALENDAR 2019

September

Fri 6 Phascogale monitoring project, Colin Cook,
Friends of Brisbane Ranges

Sun 8 Excursion - Brisbane Ranges. Various activities, starts at
10:15 am. Led by Colin Cook. Details at Friday's meeting.

Sun 22 First meeting of Junior Field Naturalist Group.
From 10.00 am at "Stringybark", Contact Bill Elder for
more information.

October

Fri 4 Making room for nature in our urban future
Dr Amy Hahs, University of Melbourne

Sun 6 Wildflowers of Enfield State Park, Emily Noble, FNCB

Committee

President	John Gregurke
Vice Pres	Fran Hanrahan
Secretary	Emily Noble
Treasurer	Kathy Elder
	Andy Arnold
	Bill Elder
	Les Hanrahan
	Val Hocking
	John Petheram
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Meetings are held at Federation University Gillies St Campus on the first
Friday of the month at 7.30pm.

Excursions: Leave from the carpark of Federation University Gillies St
Campus at 9.30 am, unless otherwise advised.

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